



2010 SUMMIT ON HEALTH, NUTRITION AND OBESITY: ACTIONS FOR HEALTHY LIVING

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOLS: SIMPLIFY AND FOCUS SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOLS

“I want to take what was discussed at the Summit and turn our state goals into action that will attack obesity on every level and create a healthy foundation for California’s future.” (Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, 2010 Summit On Health, Nutrition And Obesity, 2/24/10)

Action:

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has directed the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and the Safe Routes to School (SRTS)-funded Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC) to analyze whether or not the schools with the highest concentrations of children in need are participating in SRTS. Based on the findings, the Governor will direct Caltrans to develop strategies that will ensure equitable access to SRTS funds.

California Context:

Thirty years ago, 60 percent of children living within a two-mile radius of school walked or rode their bike to campus. But today, fewer than 15 percent of children do so even if they live within one mile of school. At the same time, studies show students are engaging in less physical activity and obesity rates have increased to epidemic proportions.

SRTS is a national program that recognizes this problem and aims to create more opportunities for children to safely walk and ride bikes to and from school. California was the first state in the nation to recognize the need for SRTS and was the model for the federal program launched in 2006. SRTS has been a successful program, increasing rates of students walking or biking to school. Not only does this increase opportunities for physical activity, it also decreases traffic and reduces greenhouse gas emissions. SRTS funding is available to communities to make improvements to traffic-related infrastructure (e.g., sidewalks, bike paths, crosswalks) and to provide community education and enforcement activities to ensure children are routinely encouraged to walk and bike to school. On August 10, 2009, Caltrans awarded \$48.5 million for 106 SRTS projects.

Despite these opportunities, barriers exist to ensuring that communities, especially low-resource communities, have access to SRTS funding. All SRTS projects, even small proposals like building a crosswalk, must adhere to cumbersome federal regulations developed to regulate large, complex federal highway projects. Advocates believe this has deterred many potential applicants, especially those in low-resource jurisdictions. Even assembling an application is complex and requires significant planning, further deterring low-resource schools from submitting proposals. California’s SRTS program does not track data to determine awards to low-resource schools, so addressing the needs of California’s communities is difficult.

Success Stories:

Caltrans has made outreach to low-resource schools a priority for its new SRTS Technical Assistance Resource Center, a three year, \$3.4 million project administered by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and the University of California, San Francisco. By directing Caltrans and TARC to evaluate the demographics of SRTS-funded communities, Caltrans and CDPH can identify barriers to access and strategies to improve the SRTS program. Additionally, by working with national SRTS organizations, California can advocate for federal reform to ease the regulatory burden placed on SRTS-funded communities.